

■ COMMENTARY

The story that will not die

The conspiracy theorists will not let President Kennedy rest in peace, reports Robert Sam Anson, and now they have their own convention

The COMDEX for conspiracy buffs," one participant called it, and in truth, the first annual "Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy," held in Dallas, November 14-16, had much of the appearance and a lot of the hubbub of the Las Vegas electronics trade show.

There were booths for hawkers peddling their wares ("coup d'état trading cards," at one; a monograph arguing that a six-gun-toting Lyndon Johnson was the assassin at another); crowded conferences on industry arcana (the "magic bullet" theory; the nuances of forensic pathology); movies and slide shows (computer-enhanced versions of the Zapruder film; grisly photos of the Kennedy autopsy); guided tours of notable local spots (the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository; Dealey Plaza's infamous "grassy knoll"); technical breakthroughs (an "image processing" camera that, it was claimed, discerned a sniper in a policeman's uniform) and startling discoveries (one plotter was, supposedly, a nuclear physicist who dismembered his parents and stored their body parts in the family fridge); even a Steve Jobs-like *éminence grise* in the person of veteran assassinologist Mark Lane, claiming—not for the first time and probably not for the last—that he had cracked the case. To wit: The CIA done it.

Hot theories. The hoopla, though, was not what seemed to attract most of the 400 who came from 30 states and four foreign countries to be at the scene of the century's most famous crime. For some, like Baltimore musician Gus Russo, who has been researching JFK's death for two decades, the lure was the chance to "sit in on buzz groups" and learn the latest developments in the case. For others, such as history Prof. David Wrone, who teaches a course in the assassination at the University of Wisconsin, it was hope that he'd be able to answer a bedeviling question: "Why do we not know what we don't know?" For still others, like Los Angeleno David Lifton, author of the best-selling conspiracy tome "Best Evidence," it was the opportunity to air a hot new theory: that Kennedy was murdered because of his intention to withdraw from Vietnam.

What all had in common, regardless of motive or ideology, was a burning conviction: that for 28 years their government has been lying to them. According to the polls, they are not alone; a majority of Americans still disbelieve the Warren Commission's finding that a single assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, shot and killed the 35th president of the United States. Nor are they without a growing number of allies, most notably Oscar-winning Oliver Stone, whose \$40 million conspiracy epic, "JFK," starring Kevin Costner as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, debuts in late December. With a slew of similarly themed books and movies in the works, the mood

in the corridors of the Dallas Hyatt Regency was relentlessly upbeat—"like a combination religious revival and Amway sales meeting," as one attendee described it.

So, on occasion, it appeared. The stormiest of applause went often to the wildest of accusations. Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworski in league with Nazis? Rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun a plotter? Hollywood controlled by the CIA? At the JFK Assassination Symposium, all—and worse—were given public airing, invariably to cheers and whistles.

Without question, however, the most insidious enemy was the "establishment press," whose ongoing support for the Warren Commission's findings was characterized variously as a "CIA plot," a "military-industrial-complex plot" and, well, a "press plot." Signs began sprouting on symposium bulletin boards. "Please be careful when talking to the L.A. Times," warned the first. "They are actually involved with the CIA and were sent here to keep tabs on us." Within hours, the *Washington Times* joined the "controlled by the



Nov. 22, 1963. A wave to the crowd on that fateful day

CIA" list, as by the end of the gathering did the *Austin Chronicle* and the "Sally Jessy Raphael" show.

But if there was some paranoia, there was also reason for it. "A lot of the people who are here weren't even born when John Kennedy was killed," noted Texas journalist Jim Marrs, author of "Crossfire," a well-regarded compendium of conspiracy theories. "All they've known is Vietnam, Watergate, Contragate, ABSCAM and CIA scandals. Instinctively, they are going to believe the worst about government, even that it's capable of murdering the president."

It was all the more remarkable, then, how earnest and unwavering was the belief that with just one more break, the truth would win out. For Andrew Winiarczyk, a Notre Dame graduate who operates the conspiracy-focused Last Hurrah Bookshop in Williamsport, Pa., spreading the word of John Kennedy's assassination is more than a business; it is his life and obsession. "The first thing I remember seeing on television was President Kennedy accepting the Democratic nomination in Los Angeles," he explains. "I was 10 when he was killed, and they say that your life is shaped by what happens to you when you were 10 years old. President Kennedy's assassination is what happened to me. That's why I have got to know."

"Someday," he says, "I think we'll all know what really happened. One of the people who killed him will tell us the true story. I'm sure of it." And will that end the pursuit? A reporter asks him. "No," Andrew smiles sadly. "By then, you see, no one will believe the truth."

ROBERT SAM ANSON IS A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN LOS ANGELES. HE HAS BEEN CRITICAL OF THE WARREN COMMISSION REPORT.